

How to Find Teen Drinkers on MySpace (or other Social Networking Websites)

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Disclaimer: Of course, as a lawyer, it seems inappropriate to begin any discussion without offering a disclaimer, so here it goes. . . This training is not associated with MySpace.com, nor any entity related to MySpace.com, nor has it been approved or endorsed by MySpace.com (or other social networking website). The opinions expressed by Jared Olson are strictly his own, nothing in this presentation should be considered as legal advice. Please consult your local prosecuting attorney and/or law enforcement for guidance on all criminal related matters.

Introduction

As a young child, before being sent out to face the world, my mother would pin a note on my shirt for the teacher, zip up my coat and warn me about the dangers of talking to strangers. There were also discussions about the hazards of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. The message was simply to “Just Say No,” if these substances were ever offered. Predators were seen as strangers lurking at the local park, and communities banded together with programs such as “Neighborhood Watch” to keep children and the community safe from crime. There were no such things as home computers, the Internet, MP3 players, cell phones or other technological advances now commonly used by children. Communicating with my friends was accomplished through face to face conversations, passing notes in class or by our one and only telephone that was attached to the wall in the kitchen, with a cord that stretched a maximum of eight feet.

Do You Speak Teen?

How much do parents really know about their child’s world? Especially as children adapt to new technologies so quickly? Unfortunately, parents still see only a glimpse of the world in which their child lives, especially as they enter their teen years. Three-fourths of teens report that their parents “almost never” monitor the Web sites they frequent or the time they spend online.

There is good news! The majority of teens still report that their parents — not their peers or the media — have the biggest influence on their decision to stay drug-free. To learn more about how you can connect better with your children, try these Action Items:

- Type “smoking weed” into a Web search engine and see what your child is exposed to.
- Find out what the drug slang terms — “blazed,” “xanibars,” “a blunt” and “robotripping” — really mean.
- Type the name of your local high school into the “search” bar of a popular teen social networking site (like MySpace, Facebook, Live Journal, etc.) and browse the profiles.

Children may be a hard study, but knowing about their world — and the pressures and influences surrounding them — will help you better communicate with your child and help keep him or her healthy and drug-free.

The Child

*On an average day in the past year, almost 8000 adolescents, aged 12 to 17, drank alcohol for the first time.*¹

- Of the people who began drinking before age 14, 47% became dependent at some point, compared with 9% of those who began drinking at age 21 or older.²
- 62.0% of 8th-graders and 82.6% of 10th-graders believe that alcohol is readily available to them for consumption.³
- 17.9% of 8th-graders and 41.2% of 10th-graders have been drunk at least once.³
- 9th-grade girls now report consuming almost as much alcohol as 9th-grade boys: 36.2% of girls and 36.3% of boys reported drinking in the past month, and 17.3% of girls and 20.7% of boys reported binge drinking.⁴
- 33.9% of 9th-grade students reported having consumed alcohol before they were age 13. In contrast, only 18.6% of 9th-graders reported having smoked cigarettes, and 11.2% reported having used marijuana before they were age 13.⁴
- A study of 5th-through 11th-grade students found that those who are exposed to and enjoy alcohol advertisements have more favorable beliefs about drinking and say they are more likely to drink in the future and consume more alcohol.⁵

The School

*Recent research shows that the human brain continues to develop into the early twenties.*⁶

- Research indicates that adolescents who abuse alcohol may remember 10% less of what they have learned than those who don't drink.⁶
- Compared with other students, the approximately one million frequent heavy drinkers have mostly low grades (D's and F's) in school.²
- High school students who use alcohol or other drugs frequently are up to five times more likely than other students to drop out of school.⁷
- Evidence suggests that alcohol use by peers is a strong predictor of adolescent use of alcohol.⁸
- One national study found that students are less likely to use alcohol if they are socially accepted by people at school, and feel that teachers treat students fairly.⁹

Social Networking Sites

Today's youth use social networking sites to stay in touch with friends, promote themselves and make new friends. When used appropriately, the Internet offers great educational and entertainment opportunities for children. Never before has there been a tool where students can access so much information and communicate with one another in so quick a fashion.

The Internet and social networking sites also offer great dangers. As parents, adults, caregivers and community members it remains our duty to protect our children and keep them safe. There have been numerous reports through the media of child sexual predators using the Internet to lure children. However, social networking sites are an avenue for other predators as well. MySpace, Facebook, Live Journal, and other social networking sites make their money through advertisements. Children can be exposed to images, messages and materials that are highly regulated through more traditional avenues such as television and radio. In addition, the self-promotion occurring between the children themselves offers great dangers.

Parents need to get up to speed on the kind of things their kids can see online. Most social networking sites do not require any sort of identity verification to become registered (such as credit card numbers). For example, MySpace requires members to be at least 14 years old to join. However, no verifying tools are used except entering a birth date. You can be anyone you want to be on these sites and it is up to the millions of members to self-police objectionable material.

Despite the ability to create false identities, many children divulge a great deal of truthful information about themselves. This includes name, age, address, phone numbers, name of school, personal photographs and/or home videos. Most children have a false perception of anonymity, believing only their friends are looking at their on-line profiles. The truth is just the opposite! The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children report that 1 in 5 kids are approached by a predator on-line. In addition, many businesses, corporations, universities and colleges are looking at on-line profiles before hiring students or offering scholarships.

How to Keep Your Kids Safe Online

Do not be afraid to treat social networking sites just like you would other privileges given to your children. Set boundaries, monitor use and discipline just like you would with anything else. Certainly there are rules regarding the family car, curfew or watching television. Similar rules can be applied to use of the Internet and social networking sites. You should have full access to your child's site, either by having their password, or by doing random site checks with your child. The computer should be put in a family place where there is lots of traffic. This allows for better supervision of what your child is doing on the computer. Whatever approach you take, be consistent and do not allow complacency to set in. If your child knows you are watching his or her experience will be a safer one!

Some Quick Tips for Parents

- Talk to your kids about their on-line activities. Ask lots of questions and let them educate you about the new technologies they use.
- Talk to them about what they see on-line, what they think about the images, videos and messages other students post. Listen and learn!
- Regularly have them show you the sites they visit and get to know their on-line friends, just as you would their regular friends.
- Keep the computer in a central room. It is much harder to keep a secret when parents can regularly see and monitor what their child is doing on the computer.
- Use filtering or parental control technologies. Block everything that is not pre-approved, rather than just filtering out the “bad” sites.
- Keep track of the websites your children visit by checking the web browser history files or cache.
- Make sure your children understand what information can and can not be shared on-line with anyone. What they post on-line could remain on-line forever.
- Practice chatting on-line with your kids so that they know how to handle strangers they encounter.
- Remind them that the cute 16-year-old girl, may not be 16, may not be a girl and may not even be cute!
- Limit the time they are able to spend on the Internet.
- Remember that you are the parent and if they do not follow the rules, remove the privileges – even if you have to take away the computer. They will still be able to complete any school assignments the same way you did in school.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this presentation please do not hesitate to contact Jared Olson, Idaho Prosecuting Attorneys Association, Idaho POST Academy/PO Box 700, Meridian, Idaho 83680, or by telephone at 208-884-7325 or by email at jared.olson@post.idaho.gov.

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